DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 295 161 CS 211 252

AUTHOR Fulwiler, Toby
TITLE Looking and Listening for My Voice.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (39th, St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Authors; Journal Writing; *Language Styles; *Literary Devices; Rhetorical Invention; Writing (Composition); Writing for Publication; Written Language
IDENTIFIERS Author Text Relationship; Narrative Text; Text Factors; *Voice (Rhetoric)

ABSTRACT

Exploring the question of whether or not each writer has one "authentic voice", this document compared the private voice (as found in a personal journal) and the published voice, as well as these voices with those of other authors. Through the process of searching for the authentic voice, the document arrives at 12 conclusions, including the following: (1) the nature of an authentic voice, if it exists, is protean and shifty; (2) most published voices are carefully constructed to present the self in particular ways; (3) authentic voices can best be found by looking at whole pieces of discourse, and by looking at samples written to different audiences for different purposes; (4) writing voices are unlikely to be characterized by the smaller technical units of composition; (5) when people hear a voice in writing, they most likely hear a "tone" characteristic of the writer's public personality; (6) the specific topic of a person's writing is a strong determiner of voice; and (7) a writer's attitude or viewpoint toward material is a stronger determiner of voice than any specific linguistic trait. The author concluded that he has one public voice (as do most writers), and this "authentic voice" is the voice that the public finds in his writing. Also, the private voice resembles other private voices more than it does an author's public voice. (ARH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED295161

Toby Fulwiler

English Department
The University of Vermont
Burlington, VT 05452

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Toby Fulwiler
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

LOOKING AND LISTENING FOR MY VOICE

During the last several years I have witnessed several interesting exchanges on the question of "authentic voice." Most people seem to agree that we can find something we might call voice--at least metaphorically--in written language, some identifying tone or timber in the language that makes us conscious of the author's presence, that lets us hear that author. The debate seems to center on whether or not each writer has one that is authentically his or her own. On the one hand, the developmentalists (romantics?) such as Ken Macrorie, Peter Elbow, and maybe Don Murray, have argued that each of us develops something of a "natural" or "authentic" voice as we mature as writers and thinkers, and that this voice emerges as distinctly "our own." On the other hand, the social constructionists (behaviourists?) such as Ken Bruffee, Joe Williams, and Geoffrey Sommerfield, have argued that there really is no such thing as a writer's single authentic voice, that we each write with an almost infinite variety of voices, depending upon context, pupose, and audience. The nature/nurture argument again.

Quite frankly, I vacillate between the two camps with remarkable regularity, my opinion depending upon such variables as the time of day, day of the week, most recent book read, last night's reading of student papers, or how I happen to formulate each position at the time I'm thinking about it.

In this paper I'm not so much concerned with aligning myself with one position or the other as I am in trying to explain the nature of written language that is associated with my own name, that apparently presents me--re-presents me--for good or ill, to the rest of the world. I believe that something like "my personal voice" exists because others tell me that they hear me in my published writing: "That really sounds like you" or "I really heard you in that piece." I infer these to be statements about "voice" ("Yes, that really sounds like Toby's voice.") However, it is also possible that they are really saying something more superficial (as in "Yes, that really looks like the style in which Toby writes"--formal, informal, blunt, pretentious, whatever.)

In the past I have not pressed these friendly voice-finders on the origins of their knowldege about my voice, but now I wish that I had, as I have become curious, myself, to know where or how exactly, my voice is to be found. Is it in the skillful use of particular verbal constructions--say noun clusters, prepositional phrases, or appositives? Or the frequency of more dubious constructions such as split infinitives, dangling modifiers, or mixed metaphors? Am I characterized once and for all by a truly unholy number of fragments, dashes, and contractions? Or because I don't use enough active verbs, coordinating conjunctions, or semi-colons? Could my voice be found in more elusive features--in rhythm, balance, scale, or symmetry? Or in more structural features--say in airtight logic, clever transitions, or cogent

CS211252

conclusions? Or in my choice of topics--like this one investigating personal voice? Or in a predictable attitude toward these topics--as in "A personal voice, along with truth, justice, and beauty, is a good thing to have."

I am having some fun picking at the particular features of what some of us would call "voice"--and others call "style." Nevertheless, I am genuinely interested in the question of whether or not I have one (or many), where I can find it (them), what it (they) actually looks like, and how much it (they) varies or doesn't according to circumstances.

I began looking for evidence of my own voice where I expected most unequivocally to find it, the pages of my journals (kept on and off now for a good twenty-five years.) The following sample was selected with as much scientific methodology as I think this question warrants--a quick flip to a random page in my current journal. Here is the resulting sample, taken from an entry dated 2/29/88:

> **Laura's out with Carol at her book group; Meg's out after work w/ friends; Anna's upstairs with Allison, mad because I banned the telephone tonight. I have spent all afternoon on catch-up writing tasks--until I really <u>am</u> caught up! (Even got the <u>CCC</u> review done in a record two days!) The reason for a lot of this blocking out of small stuff is to allow me to concentrate tomorrow on the VOICE piece for CCCC--as yet just in the discovery stages. Too, I'd like to get the piece with Hank up and off the computer & sent to the <u>Chronicle</u> ...why have I been so slow here?**

What are the elements, if any, that reveal my authentic voice in this piece? Let's look:

1. Context-bound references: I refer to people you cannot be expected to know unless I provide you with a key: i.e., Laura is my wife, Carol a teacher friend of hers, Megan my 17 year old daughter, Anna my 13 year old, Allison her 14 year old friend, Hank a colleague in history at the University of Vermont.

2. Informal language: Many features here suggest language in an informal or colloquial mode: frequent contractions and abbreviations (& and w/), a parenthetical construction, a variety of marks denoting special emphasis (underlining, capitalization, exclamation marks), vague words (stuff, a lot), and something that's either a fragment or a run-on sentence (or both combined) at the very end.

3. Punctuation: we see, in addition to commas and periods, a whole range, from those marks considered especially informal (dashes) to those especially formal (semi-colons), to those misused (an elipsis for a dash, capitalization to italicize), to those that imply exphasis (exclamation marks, underlining), digression (parentheses), and questioning (?).

Rather than continue in this particular analytical vein, let summarize my own impression of the personal voice found in my journal: it has all the features identifiable as private

language, not intended to go very far away from the self--abbreviations, contractions, digressions, fragments, casual punctuation, and imprecise diction. In other words my so-called most personal and private language is so typical of everybody else's personal and private language that it's been categorized and labelled--James Britton calls it "expressive," Janet Emig calls it "reflexive," and Linda Flower calls it "writer-based prose." So much for the uniqueness of my voice in this authentic, private sample--which, by the way, is a very typical entry from my journal.

The other most obvious place I looked for evidence of my authentically-me voice was in my published writing, for it is there, not in my journal, that people say they have actually heard me speaking. In my most recent publication, from the ADE Bulletin (Winter, 1987), I had a harder time selecting something short that was also appropriately representative. But let's try a short passage that I think sounds like me and then figure out why I think this so. In the following passage, I was preparing to argue that more writing by students in class would result in more active learning:

> **THE MONOLOGUE IN THE CLASSROOM The dominant mode of instruction in American colleges and universities--especially the larger ones--is top down and one way. Walk down the halls and look in the classrooms and what you most commonly see is an instructor standing in front of a class talking and rows of students sitting, listening, and copying. Sometimes these classes number in the hundreds, making other modes of instruction difficult--but not impossible--to conceive. Even in smaller classes of twenty-five and thirty the lecture/copy mode often prevails. In such classrooms it is the teacher, not the students, who practices and explores her language skills. This is the mode of education which Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, aptly describes as "banking" -- depositing knowledge in people as you do money in savings accounts.**
>
> "Writing Across the Curriculum:
> Implications for Teaching Literature"
> (ADE Bulletin, No. 88, Winter, 1987)

We see no context-bound references here. The only proper noun, the name of Paulo Freire, is carefully labelled (Brazilian educator...). Though I use dashes three times, a lot is one paragraph, each is used conventionally--as is all the other punctuation. There is little of the varitey or imprecision found in the journal entry. The diction, too, is more formal, with no contractions, abbreviations, first-person pronouns or colloquial words. In other words, the features here are less varied and more conventional, suggesting language aimed at readers who do not know me personally--readers to whom I want to appear conventional and respectable.

(At this point the enormity of the task begins to dawn on me: I realize that the only convincing way to locate "me" in my own prose will be to locate a significant number or "not me's" in

other people's prose. Voices against which my voice might be tested for distinction. In other words, to hear authenticity in my voice I will need to know in-authenticity when I see it. (This is getting progressively more complicated (I have now constructed in this paper a parenthetical within a parenthetical within yet another parenthetical.)))

While this published passage from the ADE Bulleitn is more conventional in terms of identifiable features, there remains an element of timber, of rhythm, of balance that I believe sounds like me--that maybe is a sample of my authentic voice--or at least one of them. Why is this so? It is not the nature of this investigation to conduct an elaborate computer analysis of my (and others') voice prints. I will, however, sketch out a few of the conclusions to which I have come concerning my own voice:

1. If there is such a thing as an authentic voice, it is protean and shifty. Even the most authentic voice--if it is mature--clearly changes according to who is listening and why it is speaking in the first place. (This is evident even in the two brief passages I selected for examination.)

2. Most published voices are carefully constructed. They are composed, revised, and edited to present the self in particular ways, conveying as best they can an image on paper that corresponds to a self-image in the author's head. (In my own case, at least in the ADE piece, I fuss over words, ideas, and especially rhythms in my writing to portray a writer who is at once democratic and scholarly, fair and committed, serious and ironic, etc.--all at the same time.)

3. Authentic voices can best be found by looking at whole pieces of discourse, preferably more than one, and by looking at samples written to different audiences for different purposes. (In other words, in any given sentence or paragraph I'm likely to sound authoritarian, Republican, or silly--an impression that subsequent paragraphs would surely correct.)

4. Writing voices, mine included, are unlikely to be characterized by the smaller technical units of composition--regardless of how many active verbs, interrogatives, first-person pronouns, or prepositional phrases a researcher may keep track of. (But I say this without having done a computer count of my own verbal habits and comparing this with others' verbal habits--maybe, in the aggregate, there is some characteristic footprint?)

5. When people hear a voice in writing, what they most likely hear is a tone espcially characteristic of the writer's public personality. This "tone" is conveyed through a carefully selected aggregate of smaller discourse features. (For example, I commonly use parentheses to suggest an ironic perspective on my own discourse--which in turn parallels a similar perspective on my life--something a writing teacher in a literature department surely needs.)

6. Writing voices which are especially distinctive often depend on language features commonly associated with creative or imaginative writing. These include deft description, apt analogies, frequent figurative language, and benign and balanced sentences. (In my writing, for instance, I work hard at alliteration.)

7. The organization and structure of one's writing, from paragraphs to larger units, contribute significantly to the image of rationality in the writer's voice. (This is not true, however, of my journal entries, where I seldom paragraph and frequently digress--often enough, I suspect, to suggest a heavy dose of irrationality--but then Freud would have something to say about the authenticity of that.)

8. The specific topic of one's writing is a strong determiner of one's voice. Most of us choose to write about only a very limited number of the world's possible topics. (All my published writing is about writing, for instance, so it is unlikely you would find my voice in a piece about computer chips, monetary reform, or grizzly bears.)

9. A writer's attitude or viewpoint toward material is a stronger determiner of voice than any specific linguistic trait. (There are some sentences that my voice should be incapable of uttering--for example, statements in support of South Africa, Contas, or Grizzly Bears.)

10. I have come to believe, in the process of writing this paper, that I have one public voice, rather than many. Its pitch, tone, and register, can vary, as will the people who hear it. And I can, on occasion, feign and adopt other voices for a while--as when I'm writing obligatory memos, grant proposals, and other kinds of fiction--but those more alien voices are difficult for me to maintain for any length of time. (I believe the same is true of most, but probably not all writers--but that really is another investigation.)

11. Since I began this investigation, I have decided that the voice the public finds in my writing, that it identifies as "me" is, in fact, distinctively mine and I will claim it. (As I read this paper, I hope that you can actually hear this voice--assertive, ironic, comic, balanced, whatever. This public voice is much worked on--I would even say carefully crafted. But the work and craft are mine. My voice speaks from principles in which I believe and is shaped according to revision strategies I have learned. It is "authentic," in that it is honest, sincere, and trustworthy, but it is self-consciously so.

12. And since I began this investigation, I have concluded that my private voice resembles other private voices more than it resembles my own "authentic" public voice. Whether people actually hear "me" in this voice will be a hit or miss proposition, as some runs of my journal writing will carry my personal language rhythm while others will not. Most often I

believe my private voice sounds/reads as fast and loose, fragmentary, uncertain, digressive, and egocentric. As such, it is more categorically expressive and less deliberately individualized than my public voice. (So while it is categorically nnot a different voice in most substantial ways, it is stylistically more awkward and less precise.) It is authentic in the sense of being the voice in which I <u>really</u>, often, and rapidly write when I am thinking out loud to myself, without conscious artifice. It is "authentic," but it is not distinctive.

At the end I find for both nature and nurture. A rhetorical "Golden Mean," I suppose. And, of course, I resolve nothing. I have decided, however, that, in person, I am more interesting, lively, and socially aware than my private voice suggests. And more boring, dull, and self-centered than my published voice reveals.

PRESENTED A CCCC
MARCH, 1988